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ABSTRACT

Portfolios can demonstrate student mastery of material and their work with concepts and content, as well as their ability to link material with other knowledge. Portfolios can closely relate what students learn to what teachers believe they teach. The decision to use portfolios requires planning, professional development, decision making, and a reconceptualization of space and time management. Teachers who use portfolios find that they become facilitators who direct students toward information and resources. A working knowledge of portfolio assessment is vital for all involved, especially parents, who must have good and consistent information. Students can be helped to understand portfolio assessment if criteria (rubrics) are developed that define performance. Although there are a number of issues that must be considered in portfolio development and some problems that must be overcome, it is apparent that portfolios offer advantages in philosophical congruence and instructional strategy. Five national clearinghouses that disseminate information on portfolios and seven schools using portfolio assessment are listed. (Contains 2 tables and 18 references.) (SLD)

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More Than Work Folders: Using Portfolios for Educational Assessment

The pendulum in the cycle of educational assessment is now swinging toward portfolios as an alternative assessment. As with learning logs, concept maps, projects, group presentations, etc., alternative assessments focus on documenting student learning. Table 1 lists characteristics of portfolios.

What portfolios are depends on the needs they serve. While school portfolios are similar to the collections that artists and authors use to obtain employment, students use them to demonstrate academic growth and learning.

Portfolios are so versatile that their use defines their characteristics. Some contain samples of typical work; others have only students' best work. Some have prescribed items; others are at students' and teachers' discretion. Portfolios may be maintained for a short time, or they may follow students through their educational careers.

Their purpose drives what portfolios contain and do. If they are to track progress toward a goal, they are appropriate in a class or subject. If they will document skills or abilities, they should result in graduation exhibitions. Proficiency portfolios are now used in statewide assessments in Arizona, California, Kentucky, Maryland, and Vermont, and other states are planning similar programs. Determining the purpose is the first consideration of those who may wish to adopt portfolio assessment.

Whether portfolios are housed in boxes, notebooks, laser discs, folders, drawers, crates, videotape, or computers, two questions must be answered: What is evidence? and What types of evidence show learning? Collins and Dana (1993) suggest four categories of evidence:

1. **Artifacts** – School documents: tests, work sheets, book reports, projects, etc.
2. **Reproductions** – Items about student activities: taped discussions, presentations, or photographs of projects.
3. **Verifications** – Letters prepared by someone other than the students that verify work or contributions.
4. **Productions** – Entries that describe each element, why it is included, and what the student learned from it.

Tests scored by scanning machines or workbook pages are not useful, but learning log entries, laboratory observation reports, data analysis, visuals of projects, etc., can provide important insights into what students know.

Many assessments have students perform tasks that are measured against permanent standards. With portfolios, however, students can explore ideas in depth and be evaluated according to the project and the creative process.

Portfolio assessment uses data from many sources. Students, teachers, and parents appreciate the benefits of linking learning and assessment, and portfolios provide reliable data about achievement and progress. Table 2 summarizes the many advantages of portfolios.

Portfolios demonstrate students' mastery of material, their work with concepts and content, and their ability to link material with other knowledge. They learn how to develop, collect, and organize materials, and they participate in assessing their achievement rather than merely being subject to it. Portfolios encourage them to direct their studies to suit their interests and needs and, because students select their best work, they chart growth. Portfolios that include both early and late work help teachers determine what progress has taken place. Rather than relying solely on teachers' opinions, students develop their own criteria for what constitutes quality or weak effort.

ISSUES AND DECISIONS

The decision to use portfolios requires planning, professional development, decision making, and a reconceptualization of time and space.

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Time To Plan and Implement. Giving students more responsibility for activities and assessment requires a systematic, long-term approach. Statewide approaches to portfolio assessment may take several years to introduce, train for, and implement, but they ensure that portfolios meet stakeholders' expectations.

Time for Faculty Involvement and Professional Development. Grades and completed courses are limited indicators and we need better ways to find out what students really know; we also need to know more about the complexities of teaching, learning, and assessment overlap; and we need to understand that learning is active rather than passive. Portfolios speak to these needs and to the professional development necessary to prepare teachers to use them.

Management and Logistical Considerations. Any portfolio format requires several implementation decisions:

- What technological resources (computers, scanners, VCRs, etc.) will enhance the portfolio process?
- How much storage space must be allocated?
- Where and how will the portfolios be stored?
- Who will own the portfolios?
- What kind of security, if any, might be needed?
- What is the legal status of portfolios?
- Will portfolios follow students from grade to grade? If so, will they include all or part of the contents?

Those who study portfolios' purpose, structures, formats, content, development, implementation, logistics, and management are well-prepared for portfolio assessment.

Table 1

Properties of Good Alternative Assessment Tasks

1. Students demonstrate knowledge and skills that are worth knowing.
2. Tasks integrate several subjects and disciplines.
3. Tasks include activities that students may expect to perform in their lives and work.
4. Interesting tasks can be performed with existing resources.
5. There is focus on broad concepts rather than on isolated facts and micro-skills.
6. There can be links to other problems and questions.
7. Tasks can be accomplished reasonably and safely in the classroom.
8. There is emphasis on creating a high quality product.
9. Tasks include teacher-student and student-student interaction.
10. Students can develop and display strengths and achievement.
11. There is focus on what students understand.
12. Students employ criteria that they negotiate and understand.
13. Students can present work in creative ways.
14. Diverse points of view are encouraged.
15. Cooperation, self, and peer evaluation are important.
16. Scoring systems are based on appropriateness rather than on simplicity.
17. Results can be understood by students, parents, and teachers.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT PORTFOLIOS

How do portfolios improve assessment?

Portfolios closely relate what students learn to what teachers believe they teach. They measure global learnings that standardized objective tests hide, they measure learning beyond the facts that skill-based achievement tests emphasize, and portfolio-making is a useful work skill.

How do portfolios improve learning?

Students study differently for portfolios. They consider ideas and concepts, outline, compare, develop applications, collect illustrations, and organize. They are as concerned with *how* they learn as they are with *what* they learn.

How do portfolios change teachers' work and role?

Teachers who use portfolios often find that they become facilitators who direct students toward information and resources. Portfolios provide opportunities for the comments essential to positive student self-concept, and they tell teachers a great deal about student skills and concerns. Many teachers find that their student relationships improve because of the opportunities for student-teacher and student-student interaction. Teacher evaluation can foster related learning opportunities and activities.

HELPING OTHERS UNDERSTAND PORTFOLIOS

Working knowledge of portfolio assessment is vital for all involved. Parents, especially, must have good and consistent information. Newsletters, newspaper articles, special presentations, cable TV, school board meetings, parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, etc., are opportunities to communicate with and meet the needs of parents and others. Parents involved in PTO/PTA or other school committees can visit schools that use portfolios and help establish groups to better understand portfolios.

EVALUATION OF PORTFOLIOS

One way to help students understand portfolio evaluation is to develop criteria (rubrics) that define performance. There are few established rubrics, so teachers, students, and others can create rubrics or scoring systems of their own. Criteria that are not carefully defined, however, give students little idea of what purpose their portfolios will serve.

Table 2

Advantages of Portfolios

For Students:

1. Students take charge of their learning.
2. Students are part of the assessment process.
3. Students develop skills that are necessary to lifelong learning.

For Teachers:

1. There is less emphasis on grading papers.
2. Information is meaningful and substantial.
3. Portfolios more accurately assess thinking skills and understanding.

For Parents:

1. Parents can see relevant student work.
2. Parents are more involved in student learning.

Portfolios are both process and product. Deciding what they will include helps develop thinking skills that reflect learning and decision making.

Individual or group portfolio conferences merge instruction and assessment. Teachers can listen to individuals or groups talk about portfolios in progress, hear rationales for including or rejecting items, and question students about levels of understanding. If intervention is necessary, portfolio conferences can be viable contexts. Conferences are critical to maximizing the value of the process, and they can be scheduled to accommodate everyone involved.

PROBLEMS WITH PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Portfolios may have an initial excess of worksheets and quizzes, but these decrease in number as collections grow.

The testing industry questions if prompted writings are reliable measures of student writing and asks if portfolios should reflect testing industry standards.

In addition to the time needed for analysis, maintaining portfolios for each student in each class may be an impossible burden for teachers.

Large schools with portfolios in many subjects would need valuable filing space and an efficient filing/retrieval system.

Portfolios may require changes in teaching styles—a major difficulty for many.

Some students might not perform well on some assignments if they know they will not be in their portfolios; others will not complete them in time; still others will have difficulty keeping track of items that should be in portfolios.

A portfolio that receives only one grade may not tell a student where improvement is necessary.

Most evaluations are subjective, and many see reliability as more relevant to standardized testing than to portfolios. Reliability can be attained, however, by using more than one scorer or by collecting information over time.

The success of programs that require teachers to use portfolios is yet to be determined.

CONCLUSION

Portfolios offer advantages in philosophical congruence and instructional strategy; they guide students to the knowledge and skills that educators value rather than the learning of isolated facts and details.

No assessment system will solve all evaluation problems, and any technique will create as many problems as it solves. Standardized testing is the only method some will ever feel comfortable with. For those willing to try new approaches, however, portfolio evaluation can guide students in the observation, data collection, and evaluation that may better prepare them for the 21st century. Its time has come.

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Networks and Clearinghouses

Portfolio News
Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse
Teacher Education Program
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0070

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Authentic Assessment
Pacific Region Educational Laboratory
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1409, Honolulu, HI 96813
Contact: Kathleen Busick
Telephone: (808) 532-1900; FAX: (808) 532-1922

Designing District Evaluation Instruments for Math and Science Process Skills
6321 North Canon del Pajaro, Tucson, AZ 85715
Contact: Shelley Lipowich, Math/Science Consultant
Telephone: (602) 299-9583; FAX: (602) 886-2370

Thinking Assessment
Maryland Center for Thinking Studies
Coppin State College
500 West North Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21216
Contact: Sally Duff
Telephone: (410) 396-9362

Schools Using Portfolio Assessment
(Source: *Portfolio News*)

Amphitheater High School
Amphitheater School District
125 Yavapai, Tucson, AZ 85705
Contact: Deborah Walker; Principal: Ramon Paz
Telephone: (602) 292-4550; FAX: (602) 292-4593

Bret Harte Junior High
3700 Coolidge Avenue, Oakland, CA 94602
Contact: Malia Dinnell
Telephone: (415) 482-5825

Chattanooga City Schools
1161 West 40th Street, Chattanooga, TN 37401
Contact: Diana Dankowski
Superintendent: Harry Reynolds
Telephone: (615) 825-7279; FAX: (615) 825-7375

Chauncey Rose Middle School
1275 Third Avenue, Terre Haute, IN 47807
Contact: Tammy Roeschlein; Principal: Daniel Tanoos
Telephone: (812) 462-4474

Design and Architecture Senior High School
4001 N.E. 2nd Avenue, Miami, FL 33137
Contact: Victor Budzyn, III; Principal: Mrs. Hinchey
Telephone: (305) 573-7135

Grossmont Union High School District
Planning and Assessment
P.O. Box 1043, La Mesa, CA 91944-1043
Contact: William Brock
Telephone: (619) 465-3131; FAX: (619) 4672-5721

Montgomery Blair High School
313 Wayne Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910
Contact: Dolores D'Angelo; Principal: Philip Gainous
Telephone: (301) 650-6600; FAX: (301) 650-6692

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